**On The Farm**

By Richard West

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On June 11th we opened our gate for Open Farm Sunday, along with 250 other farms around the U.K., five years after the last time. Open Farm Sunday is organised by Leaf (Linking Environment and Farming). It is thought 170,000 people visited a farm on June 11th this year. We think around 400 of them visited Stocken Farm; we hope they found their visit rewarding.

For the weeks running up to the big day we wondered why we had decided to do it, there is a lot of preparation .... tidying up, setting up, doing risk assessments, persuading all the helpers that this is how they want to spend their Sunday! This was a free event, and all the displays of machinery and other displays were done by farming friends and family, with the only reward being of feeling the farming industry and its consumers had become a little closer together. We had many interesting questions from you, about cows, crops, hedge row management etc. and a surprising number asking if we sell unpasteurised milk direct to the public (the answer is no). These are good questions for us as it makes us look at our industry from a different angle. Our staff enjoyed the opportunity to showcase the stock they tend day in, day out; also being able to explain why we may be combining near your house late on a Sunday night or on the road with our equipment holding the traffic up. It’s not just for fun but trying to do an operation which is all part of the ultimate aim of farming which is to produce good quality food, which is still very popular. Hopefully making a profit on the way.

Arla, our milk cooperative sent us out a pallet of Arla products for visitors to sample, which three members of their staff came down to hand out. They came from down Leeds and London, volunteering their own time. Phil Hunter, a keen metal detectorist for many decades, came to display his finds that he has found in the local area; fascinating history found in the fields around us. Fiona, another local farmer, brought her beehives (without bees) to demonstrate how apiculture works; her husband lan provided the tractor and trailer rides all day, which were constant) in demand. Princes Risborough Young Farmers also ran a barbeque, and helped run the day, a big workforce that also gave their day up in the interest of farming.

In June, lan our herdsman for over 25 years, decided to hang up the clusters for the last time. We thank him for his dedication to our cows and business, and wish him well in the future. Over his time the business has changed quite dramatically; cow numbers have risen and milk yields per cow have gone up by nearly 50%. Expectations in milk quality have risen and the pressures of farming have changed. Nowadays numerous people come to the farm with clipboards making sure we do everything to their standard. Availability of skilled farm staff is becoming an ever-increasing issue for our industry. Farmers are looking at all sorts of technical solutions like robotic milking, these will help but won't remove the need for skilled agricultural staff. It is often a career not promoted at school age, but it is worth considering. We are increasingly operating with part time employees.

In early August we expect to start our wheat harvest. So far, the crops look in good condition, so fingers crossed they deliver a good yield and are up to milling quality. Since we planted the wheat, the value per tonne has gone from around £200/ton to £350/ton, it has now dropped back £170/ton for harvest movement. It is so difficult to predict which direction the price will go from there. We have made our grass silage, and whole crop rye and barley.

The last main forage to come in will be the maize in September. It's been a difficult spring to establish maize, with constant wet in March and April and much of May, changing rapidly to baking dry in June. We have approximately 20 acres of maize planted at the end of May which only germinated in July as it went dry straight after planting, this will probably come to nothing much.

While the cows are out during summer, we have been improving our cow housing, which is proving to be very time consuming, but will be good by the time the cows are housed.

In May we had some reactors when we were TB testing. This means we can not sell any cattle to other farmers until we have two clear tests. Our next test will be around the beginning of August.

So, with harvest upon us and many more agricultural vehicles on the road, when you get behind a tractor and trailer or combine on the road, please be patient, and remember we are working to keep your fridge and larder full!